Eccentrics and Fakers

By STANLEY WALKER.

"EIGHTH street!" yelled a guard on the Sixth avenue "L" the other night. And he added: "Let the nuts off!"

In common with many others that guard believed that much of the population of Greenwich Village is made up of those unfortunates commonly referred to as "nuts." But he was mistaken. The real ones, and the real men of genius, either died in another and more glorious age or have been put away where their idiosyncrasies will not annoy hard headed, practical citizens.

You point to our more flamboyant Villagers. I answer: Are they genuine? In the memory of persons still living, as the biographers say, there is Jean the Wild Girl, who would go out late on cold winter nights attired in flimsy garments and roller skate up and down lower Fifth avenue. But this hobby was not the outcropping of a mad genius. Rather it was the result of a hope that somebody would be shocked. If she had lived uptown she would have been dismissed as a mere flapper.

About those stories of the doings of the long haired young men who live in basements in the Village without heat and with little food, the squalid life is the result of shiftlessness and nothing else.

The question of the eccentric artist—painter, sculptor or writer—was taken to David Edstrom, the Swedish sculptor, who has known and observed "nuts" in New York, Paris, Stockholm and Florence. He says the number of the genuine in New York is negligible.

"Professional nuts there are," said Edstrom. "They have read that one of the markings of genius is eccentricity, and so they deliberately set about to cultivate their foibles. When a man begins to show signs either of genius or of being crazy he lands in an asylum."

But this subject is flippant only where the bogus are being discussed. Otherwise it is pathetic and leads into the lives of the great geniuses, who, through ill health and poverty and their distorted imaginations, were misunderstood and their careers cut short. The most notable American case that comes to mind is that of the late Ralph Albert Blakelock. His death in 1919 ended a life of almost unbelievable misfortune. When he was doing his best work he was unable to earn enough to support his wife and nine children, and his genius was recognized by few until he had been for a long time in the State Hospital for the Insane at Middletown. And when friends procured his release the old fire never was able to assert itself again. Before his breakdown he painted on the lids of cigar boxes and sold the originals to a frame maker in Forty-second street for fifty cents each.

And one of Blakelock's hallucinations was that he was a man of wealth.

Lafcadio Hearn, besides being a chronic invalid, sometimes conceived a terrible hatred for his dearest friends and imagined that they were planning to ruin him; William Cowper showed symptoms of melancholia, and his attacks of suicidal mania led to his confinement in sanitariums; Rousseau's life was made miserable by delusions of persecution. And there are hundreds of other examples. Peculiarities run through many degrees—harmless eccentricity, paranoia and hopeless insanity.

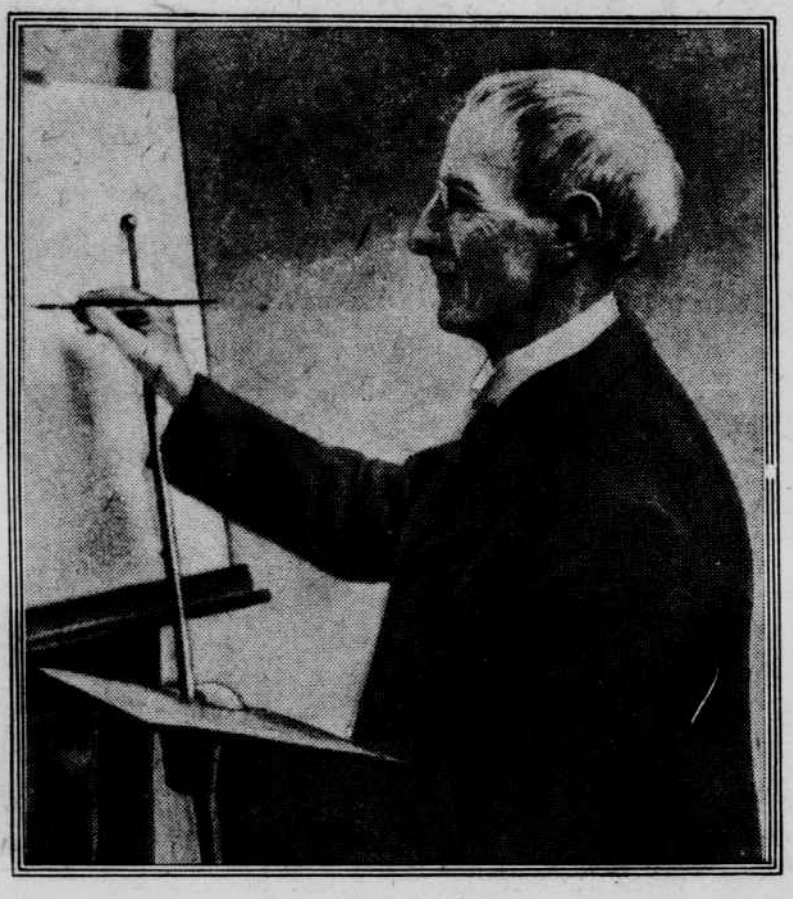
David Edstrom's simple explanation is that aberrations are the result of a powerful imagination being distorted or impaired, usually by sickness or poverty. He says:

"We all adore reading the masterpieces of a Balzac, a Strindberg or a Shakespeare, but we do not realize that the terrible mental anguish such as August Strindberg describes in his "Inferno" is more or less common to all genius.

"Strindberg once in paranoiac terror imagined some mysterious person had created a machine the vibrations of which could be thrown through the floor or the walls of an adjoining room to destroy him. For weeks under these delusions he would flit from house to house, sometimes jumping out of windows to escape his imagined persecutor.

"That very imagination that creates a great work of art or a great literary masterpiece, when crippled for any reason becomes a source of terror and suffering to the man of genius. What added masterpieces might have been ours from Poe or Keats if a hard, matter of fact world had not hastened their dissolution and departure from this life!

"One of my memories," said Edstrom, "is of a young painter who lived with me and others in an artists' home in Stockholm that the great patron Ernest Thiel had tried to make a home for genius. If this young man was not the only crazy one among us, his particular form of eccentricity was at least more upsetting. His belief was that ghosts entered into the house through the chimney, and he took it upon himself to keep watch. He would climb to the roof and put a board across the chimney during the wildest storms, and there he would freeze or starve until we pulled him down. When we destroyed the ladders he climbed up the water pipes, but at last the strain on us all became so great that he was sent away.



Ralph Albert Blakelock.

"Another case was the celebrated Belgian sculptor and painter, De Groux. At the time I met him in Florence he had run away from his wife in Paris. She was devoutly religious and De Groux, to escape her efforts to convert him, ran away. In 1906 a man named Hugo—he was a grandson of Victor Hugo, though I cannot recall his first name—came to Florence and tried to persuade him to return. This he refused to do. Hugo had him interned in a private sanitarium in Florence. He was allowed to take long walks with his keeper, and one day he eluded the keeper and walked all the way to Genoa, where he took up miserable lodgings in the sailors' quarter.

"At last he managed to get passage back to Paris, where he was reunited with his wife. Later he went to Tolstoi in Russia, and with that great man he recovered from his aberration and became one of the most productive and extraordinary masters of our time."

"A worldwide fame," said Edstrom, "belonged to a great author who was one of the coterie of celebrities we associated with in Rome. Let us for fun call him Defoe.

"Defoe had for some years suffered from a tapeworm. He had at first tried the usual house cures and painful remedies without avail. Then he had commenced the round of specialists, psycho-therapeutic healers in every town from which rumor, research or fame brought to him a message of possible alleviation. Had his creative mind built up a Frankenstein, or had nature really created a worm to defy the skill of science and quackdom, I don't know. I only have the great man's version of the matter.

"His great literary works, his experiences in love, marriage and children never had given him a permanent all absorbing interest. He had it with him all the time, and although his face was yellow and strained with suffering, whether from all the noxious drugs he had taken, from hypochondria or the terrific activity in pondering and analyzing life or the worm itself, I don't know. But he was, nevertheless, one of life's great adventurers into the hidden and unsolved, and though it seems to have ended his literary career, he, like a hermit, had found peace and contemplation in solitude."

Edstrom himself is a calm enough individual now—prosperous and as full of poise as a banker. Nobody would call him a nut now. But Edstrom tells this story about himself:

"During the days of dark penury and struggle in Stockholm I had decided to commit suicide. I had thought a great deal of the project and of how I should get out of this shell of life into the other house or condition where we get when the light is snapped off.

"At last I chose the beautiful little crag called "Castelholmen," in the harbor of Stockholm. It is a romantic place, reached by a bridge. On the highest point of the island is perched an ancient castle. The steep cliff over the sea that bleak, stormy November night was a proper and grand place to die. The waves beating up against the rock in the dark and cold I could not see, but their thunderous call assured me they would make no mess of my execution did I jump into their cold and ample arms.

"At the psychological moment when death's sweet calm lips were about to meet my own and the bosom that stills all heartaches press against mine, I suddenly felt that a springing so brutally over the cliff was not the æsthetic and proper way. No, the Valkyrie that was to carry me to Valhalla must come with the wave and take me. On the other side of the island the shore sloped gently down to the sea. There I would lie down as the sea receded and then a wave would come and gently take me out.

"I lay down and the wave came. Gee! How cold! And what a frantic job it was to get out again! In mortal terror of catching cold from the icy bath I was nearly arrested because of my wild flight through the town to get to my room, and into bed between warm blankets and with a hot drink inside."

And so, bearing all that in mind, it would not have been improper to have told the Sixth avenue elevated guard that, in affecting their quaint modes of dress, in cultivating unnatural eccentricities, the "nuts" of Greenwich Village were presumptuous—tampering with the exclusive prerogatives of the mighty.